

BRINGING AFRICA TOGETHER



THE ETHIOPIAN AIR LINES STORY

PART 1: TWA, THE WONDERLAND ROUTE & MODERNISATION

In the first half of a new two-part series, airline historian MAURICE WICKSTEAD traces the genesis and development of Africa's most successful national air carrier, Ethiopian Air Lines, established with the considerable benefit of TWA's long experience within a matter of months of the end of the Second World War. All aboard the Wonderland Express . . . !



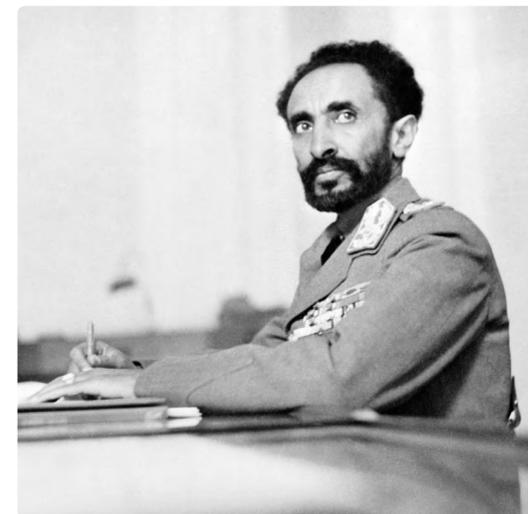
ETHIOPIA — A VAST land-locked country of rugged mountains, rift valleys, high plateaus and desert in the Horn of Africa, almost five times larger than the British Isles — seems an unlikely place to host one of Africa's most dynamic and consistently profitable airlines. Yet, during 2016–19, Ethiopian Airlines was voted No 1 among African air carriers. That it has been able to overcome many challenges and achieve this prestigious status is down to the fact that, unlike many of its post-colonial contemporaries in Africa dogged by political interference, corruption and nepotism, it has always been run on strictly independent commercial lines.

AN INTERNATIONAL OUTLOOK

In early May 1941, freed from the yoke of Italian colonisation by British and local forces, Ethiopia welcomed its exiled ruler, Haile Selassie, back to the capital, Addis Ababa. Travelling widely in the pre-war years, Selassie had become an admirer of the West and had developed an internationalist outlook. With help from France and Sweden, a rudimentary air force had been established in Ethiopia, the training of local pilots and engineers beginning in 1930; but it was not until the country became part of Mussolini's *Africa Orientale Italiana* (Italian East Africa) that there was any significant aviation activity there. Italian airline Ala Littoria's prestigious *Linea dell'Impero* linked Rome with Addis Ababa from October 1936, and thereafter a 16-point regional air network was established with a small fleet of Caproni Ca 133 trimotors. [See the author's three-part series *Italy's Forgotten Airlines in TAH31–33 — Ed.*]

Taking the helm once more, Selassie was keen to begin modernising his country, described in some quarters as "semi-feudal". High on his list of priorities was transport infrastructure, and a key part of this programme was the creation of a national airline. Discussions for assistance had already taken place with delegates from France and Sweden in 1944, but it was to the USA, with its superior resources, that Ethiopia finally turned. Talks with the State Department under John H. Spencer, who had previously represented Ethiopia at the League of Nations, led to Brig-Gen Thomas B. Wilson, Board Chairman of TWA, being assigned to undertake a full assessment. The outcome was the conclusion of an agreement early in September 1945 that would create an airline for Ethiopia.

Ethiopian Air Lines Inc (EAL) was formally established by charter on December 21, 1945,



ABOVE Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia during 1930–74. He is seen here in 1942, the year after his return to his home country after five years in exile in the UK, most of which was spent at Fairfield House in Bath. Selassie was a reformer and forward-thinker, and was determined that Ethiopia should be modernised to face the brave new post-war world.

with TWA contracted to provide managerial and technical support as well as the supply of aircraft, aircrew and engineers, plus the training of local personnel. The American carrier was to be remunerated annually on a cent-per-mile basis up to a maximum of \$12,000. The initial share capital (25,000 units) was set at 2.5m Ethiopian Birr (ETB) — approximately \$1.08m — financed by the Ethiopian government.

The company's first President and Chairman was Fitawrari Tafasse Habte Mikael, Minister of Works & Communications, while the first General Manager, appointed by TWA, was H.H. "Dutch" Holloway, himself an 18,000-hour pilot. With traffic rights negotiated for Aden, Saudi Arabia, French Somaliland, Egypt and Sudan, thoughts soon turned towards equipment. From the large quantity of war-surplus Douglas C-47s awaiting their futures at Cairo's Payne Field, five with spares were purchased by EAL against \$314,000 deposited in Cairo and New York banks. The aircraft, registered ET-T-1 to ET-T-5, arrived in formation over Addis Ababa on February 1, 1946, and shortly afterwards the first commercial flight was inaugurated, a charter carrying \$3.7m in bank-transfer currency to Nairobi in Kenya.

On Sunday, March 10, 1946, in order to introduce an unfamiliar public to air travel, EAL

OPPOSITE PAGE One of Ethiopian Air Lines's three twin-engine Convair 240s being loaded at Dire Dawa with khat, a herbal stimulant popular in north-east Africa, before a flight to Djibouti circa 1960. The first two EAL Convairs were acquired direct from the manufacturer in December 1950; the other came from Sabena in 1956.